

MASSACHUSETTS RARE AND ENDANGERED PLANTS

LINEAR-LEAVED MILKWEED

(Asclepias verticillata L.)

DESCRIPTION

Asclepias verticillata is a perennial herb of the Milkweed family. It has a slender, erect, unbranched stem, 1-1.5' (30-50cm.) high, and often grows with multiple shoots from a single base. The numerous leaves are linear, 1-2" (2-5cm.) long, and arranged in whorls of 3 to 6 leaves (the specific name, "verticillata" meaning whorled). The slender flowers are white to greenish, $\frac{1}{4}$ " (4-5mm.) long, and form flat-topped clusters from the upper nodes of the stem. The flowers appear from early July to mid-August. The fruit is an erect, slender pod, ripening in color from light greenish to maroon. The best time to identify Asclepias verticillata is in late September when the leaves are still present, and the fruit is ripening to its distinctive wine-red color.



Britton, N.L. and M.A. Brown. An Illustrated Flora of the Northern United States and Canada. Dover Publications, Inc. 1970 reprint of 1913 ed.

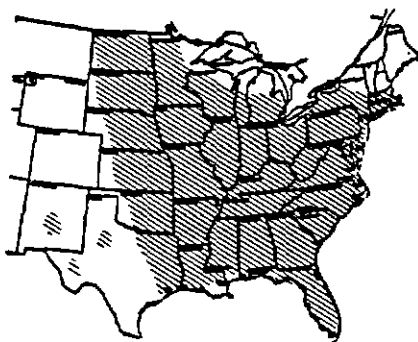
SIMILAR SPECIES IN MASSACHUSETTS

When not in flower or fruit, Butter-and-eggs (Linaria vulgaris) may appear like Asclepias verticillata, but the leaves of Butter-and-eggs, though linear, are alternately arranged, not whorled.

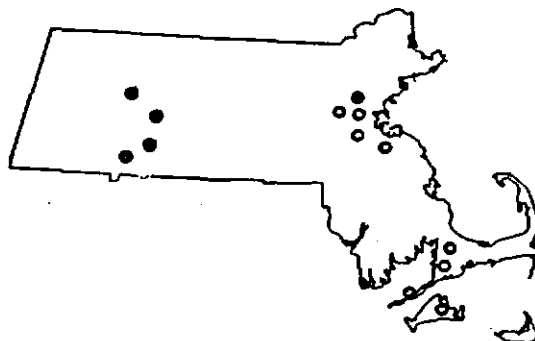
HABITAT IN MASSACHUSETTS

Linear-leaved Milkweed is found in a variety of dry, open situations with exposure varying from full sun to partial

(continued overleaf)



Distribution of Asclepias verticillata



- Verified since 1978
- Reported prior to 1978

Distribution in Massachusetts by Town

LINEAR-LEAVED MILKWEED (continued)

shade. It occurs on sunny ledges with ferns (Asplenium platyneuron, A. trichomanes, Woodsia ilvensis), lichens, and mosses. On ridgetop grasslands and rocky slopes, it is found with grasses (Panicum spp., Danthonia spicata, Andropogon scoparius), goldenrods (Solidago bicolor, S. caesia), and scattered Red Cedar (Juniperus virginiana).

RANGE

Linear-leaved Milkweed is distributed from Massachusetts to North Dakota, south through Florida to Texas. Disjunct populations occur in western Texas and New Mexico. Asclepias verticillata is found in different habitats in its range: forest openings in the Northeast, periodically burned pinelands in the Southeast, and rocky bluffs throughout. However, it is most common on Midwestern native prairies.

POPULATION STATUS

Linear-leaved Milkweed is considered to be endangered in Massachusetts. Six occurrences have been found since 1978, but sixteen historical sites are recorded. Current populations consist almost entirely of small numbers of plants, and many populations are in danger of overshadowing by maturing forests. Asclepias verticillata is now nearly extirpated from eastern Massachusetts because of succession.